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## Understanding French Culture through Film

*Prof. Philippe Chavasse*

*Foreign Languages*

Understanding French culture today begins with examining France's complex relation to modernity. One of the forerunners of modern democracy, France is known as a land of asylum, respectful of human rights. Such a tradition of tolerance originates in the universalist message of the French Revolution. Yet France's upholding of universalism as a core value of its republican heritage tends to be associated with an assimilationist impulse rooted in nationalism interfering with the preservation of the cultural integrity of ethnic minorities within a global environment characterized not only by constant exchanges, but also intensified immigration. A highly centralized state and unified culture, France became an industrialized country relatively late, maintaining a strong rural identity which conflicted with modern urban development. France's notorious defensiveness towards American capitalist expansion

was largely motivated by a desire to preserve a perceived cultural exceptionalism threatened by the leveling forces of modernity, commonly associated with Anglo-Saxon, and more specifically American influences.

The circulation of audio-visual material has been a particular point of contention between France and the United States, Hollywood's massive exportation of American films being often viewed as a form of cultural imperialism. A closer look at the history of French and American cinema reveals, however, a series of exchanges and mutual influences which question the very notion of a cultural exceptionalism being expressed through film, a central notion in France's opposition to the United States. This opposition was particularly exacerbated during the 1990s GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) negotiations when the United States insisted on the inclusion of cinema in the provisions for unrestricted market access.

These issues are explored in the course I teach yearly titled French Films and Hollywood. Emanating from a genuine interest in cinema, this course integrates aspects of my research on film and the construction of national identity. I am currently working on a manuscript on the interplay between nationalism and naturalist fiction in late nineteenth century France and its repercussions on Belgian, Haitian, and Quebec literatures. This presentation is inspired by my work on France's identity struggle portrayed in recent French films. It serves as an introduction to the discussion of a final group project completed by students in my French Films and Hollywood course. Conceived as an examination of French culture and the complex relation between France

and the United States, the course focuses on a selection of French films and their American remakes. Students create a sequence of a French film and the American version of the same sequence for their final project. In addition to scripts and a video, they provide a two page paper contrasting both sequences. The final project is meant to illustrate students' comprehension of cinematic as well as cultural differences revealed by the study of films originating from France and the United States. The course being open to non speakers of French, scripts are written in English.

My presentation addresses three French films questioning France's identity at the dawn of the new millennium. The first two, *When the Cat's Away* (1996) by Cédric Klapisch and *Western* (1997) by Manuel Poirier, display a similar approach to contemporary France rooted in the refusal to face a reality identified as threatening, and seeking refuge in comforting yet deceiving images perpetrating a state of national denial with regard to the integration of immigrants, one of the most problematic issues facing French society today. While resolutely modern in their positive emphasis on cosmopolitanism and decentralization, both films convey a harrowing vision of reality that their escapist conclusions are not sufficient to alleviate. Based on the narration of a journey, their plots focus on a restricted space and selected people, rendering impossible the emergence of a truly communal experience. Isolated in urban or rural settings, the characters in the films ultimately resemble victims of a diaspora which does not turn into a salutary pilgrimage tearing them away from places to accomplish universal mutual assistance, but rather leads to a reactionary stance accompanied by selective solidarity.

Reminiscent of French new wave cinema, the stylistic spontaneity of *When the Cat's Away* functions essentially as a deception since the natural sets provided by the streets of Paris are synonymous with a confinement within a picturesque yet outdated representation of France's capital immortalized most notably in films of the 1930s. Significantly, the film focuses on a cast of old ladies exemplifying this dying era, who are threatened by displacement due to a gentrification process. Despite the director's effort to void Paris of its multi-ethnic population, racial tensions are visible throughout the film. The representation of ethnic minorities however is framed by the discourse of the racist majority thus forging an illusory sense of comfort based on consensual values in which Chloé, the main protagonist of the film, ultimately seeks refuge.

Human interactions in Poirier's *Western* are also limited to a small network of characters to the exclusion of the larger and problematic social context of contemporary France. Two foreigners are shown wandering with ease on the roads of the deeply traditional region of Brittany. Their negative encounters with the local population are relatively few and are used for comic relief, which greatly undermines the effect of the xenophobia being displayed. Similarly, the film's final sequence uniting children of all ethnic backgrounds at what appears to be a family dinner proposes a generous yet unrealistic vision of integration reminiscent of the two century old assimilationist creed of the French Republic with a notable obliteration of the children's communities of origin.

In the third film under study, *Children of the Land* (2006), Pierre Javaux touches on the limits of France's national imaginary as he revisits

the phony war, a turning point in French history, using stereotypical images of the year 1940 and a small countryside village to hint at the dissolution of a centripetal dream. Marianne's bust, an allegorical figure of the French Republic, is dragged through the mud while new mythologies inspired by new journeys are being forged. The final sequence suggests the end of France's integrity as a consensual nation, strongly rooted and unified. As France's Belgian border is being violated, German tanks aim at the steeple of the village church hiding improbable brothers, a patrol of misled Senegalese fighters and an old farmer, and the farmer's grandchildren embark on an abandoned barge, finding refuge in the naive and bitter hope of an impossible family reunion on African ground at a time when Paris, the country's political and intellectual center, is about to fall into the hands of foreigners.

The inclusion of Senegalese fighters in Javaux's film, an unusual sight in French films about the second world war, should theoretically contribute to appease second and third generation immigrants in France by offering them a place in their country's collective memory. However, Javaux's historical representation of a multi-ethnic France remains largely unconvincing. While conveying a generous message of reconciliation, *Children of the Land* displays a pervasive nostalgia characterized by anachronistic visions which betray an irreducible ethnic disjunction ultimately ruining the film's founding utopia. In the final sequence, the reference to deterritorialisation makes this failure evident as it perversely suggests that communion with others only becomes an alternative for those being exiled and uprooted.

The group final project which follows focuses mostly on representational differences between French and American cinema. These differences are nevertheless revealing of a certain perception of France as more liberal, intellectual, and sophisticated than the United States. Such generalities enable students to approach and conceptualize an unfamiliar culture. The purpose of my French Films and Hollywood course, however, is not only to examine major differences between French and American cultures, but also to become aware of the deception involved in such categorizations, students ultimately gaining from this experience a more relativist and therefore democratic perspective on the world they inhabit. The emphasis on representational over cultural differences in this final project is to some extent significant of such an evolution.